

SACRIFICE AT FORT FISHER, 15 JANUARY 1865

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In January 1865, Union forces embarked on what was then the largest U.S.-led amphibious operation in history. Their target was a colossal fort strategically located on a peninsula jutting from the Confederate seaport of Wilmington, N.C. Its name was Fort Fisher.



Naval Brigade attacking Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865.

The operations in January marked the second time Union forces had tried to take down the Confederate Goliath. Only weeks earlier, in December 1864, Union forces were thwarted by a combination of poor planning, poor execution and bad weather. The so-called “Second Battle of Fort Fisher” would, in contrast, be a resounding victory and help ensure the seizure of the Confederacy’s last major Atlantic port.

The U.S. Navy was represented by some 58 warships carrying over 600 guns. In addition to bombarding the fort and supporting ground forces, on January 15th, the Navy landed a brigade of 1,600 Sailors and 400 Marines. The Naval Brigade’s mission was to capture the fort’s sea facing Northeast Bastion, while the Army attacked the fort’s northern land face. Accompanying this “boarding party,” were several Navy physicians including a 25-year Assistant Surgeon named William Longshaw, Jr.



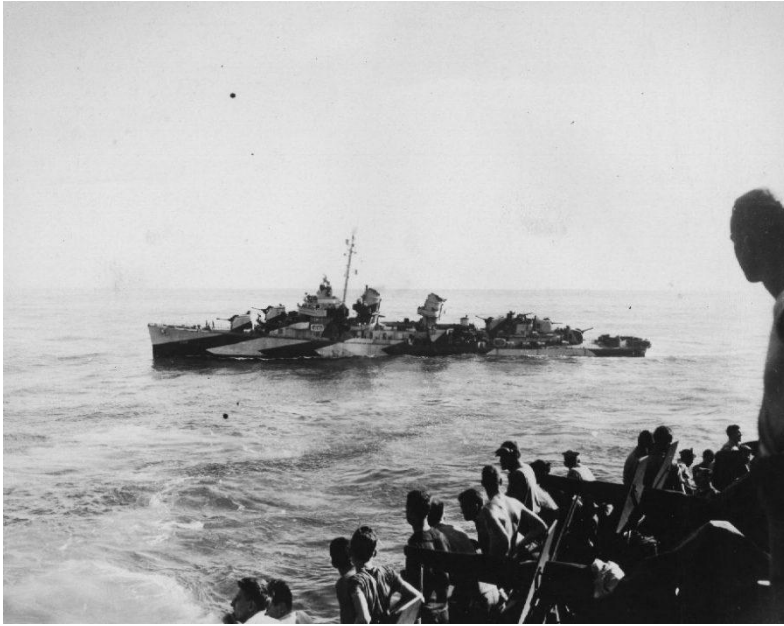
William Longshaw, Jr.

Armed with cutlasses and Colt revolvers, the Brigade charged the entrenched enemy through a gauntlet of artillery fire and palisade fences to the fort's impenetrable defenses. As the fort's defenders methodically picked off the Sailors and Marines, Dr. Longshaw—equipped with only a medical kit and impressive supply of courage—rushed to each wounded man applying tourniquets and binding wounds. He was later even credited with saving the life of a drowning Sailor prior to the assault.

Lt. Cmdr. Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr., commander of the third division of the Naval Brigade, witnessed first-hand Longshaw's bravery on that day. In a history of the battle, Selfridge wrote:

"While kept under the walls of the fort, I was an eyewitness to an act of heroism on the part of Asst. Surg. William Longshaw, a young officer of the medical staff, whose memory should ever be kept green by his corps, and which deserves more than this passing notice. A Sailor, too severely wounded to help himself, had fallen close to the water's edge and with the rising tide would have drowned. Dr. Longshaw, at the peril of his life, went to his assistance and dragged him beyond the incoming tide. At this moment he heard a cry from a wounded marine, one of a small group who, behind a little hillock of sand close to the parapet, kept up a fire upon the enemy. Longshaw ran to his assistance. . ."

Attempting to save that Marine's life was Longshaw final act before being killed by enemy gunfire. It was later reported that on the day of the engagement the young doctor had been granted a leave of absence, but postponed his departure so he could take part in the assault.



USS Longshaw (DD-559)

Longshaw's sacrifice would not be forgotten by the U.S. Navy. In 1943, the Navy named a destroyer in physician's honor. To date, USS *Longshaw* (DD-559) is one of 19 ships to be named in honor of a Navy physician.

Sources:

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